Romulus Augustulus

(31 October 475 – 4 September 476)

SOURCES

Romulus Augustus (c. 465 – after 511), nicknamed **Augustulus**, was Roman emperor of the West from 31 October 475 until 4 September 476. Romulus was placed on the imperial throne while still a minor by his father Orestes, the *magister militum*, for whom he served as little more than a figurehead. After a rule of ten months, the barbarian general Odoacer defeated and killed Orestes and deposed Romulus. As Odoacer did not proclaim any successor, Romulus is typically regarded as the last Western Roman emperor, his deposition marking the end of the Western Roman Empire as a political entity. The deposition of Romulus Augustulus is also sometimes used by historians to mark the transition from antiquity to the medieval period.

Very few records survive of Romulus's reign. There are no known policies, laws or inscriptions of significance of the emperor, which leaves the impression that he was a shadowy and relatively inconsequential figure. The nickname "Augustulus" means "little Augustus" and was a derisive reference to his young age. Romulus's immediate family, including his father and possibly his mother, and maybe both his paternal and maternal grandparents, were from the Roman province of Pannonia, and many of his family members had military backgrounds.

Romulus came to power through the usurpation of his predecessor Julius Nepos (r. 474–475 in Italy) in 475. Nepos fled to Dalmatia and continued to claim the imperial title in exile, which hampered Romulus's legitimacy and ensured that he was never recognised by the Eastern Roman emperor Zeno. In 476, the allied barbarian *foederati* in Italy demanded Italian lands to settle on, which was refused by Orestes. Under Odoacer, the *foederati* defeated and killed Orestes and deposed Romulus, whereafter Odoacer became the first King of Italy and accepted Emperor Zeno as his nominal superior.

Romulus's life was spared by Odoacer, and he was allowed to retire to the *castellum Lucullanum*, a great fortress in Campania. Little certain information is known concerning Romulus's life in exile. He might have played a role in founding a monastery at *castellum Lucullanum* in the 480s or 490s, dedicated to Saint Severinus of Noricum. Romulus could have been alive as late as 507 or 511 when Theodoric the Great, Odoacer's successor, wrote a letter to a "Romulus" concerning a pension. Romulus was likely dead before the mid-540s, as accounts of the eastern Roman invasion of Italy at that time do not mention him.

NAME

Romulus Augustus' birth name was simply Romulus; he was named after his maternal grandfather, a nobleman from Poetovio in Noricum. Upon his accession to the imperial throne, he also took Augustus as a proper name, not just a title. Many historians have noted the coincidence that the last western emperor bore the names of both Romulus, the legendary founder and first king of Rome, and Augustus, the first emperor. The full style used on his coinage was Dominus Noster Romulus Augustus Pius Felix Augustus. Romulus Augustus was often colloquially referred to as "Augustulus" (meaning "little Augustus") even in his own time, in reference to his youth. "Augustulus" was a derisive nickname and was never in official use; all of Romulus' coins use the names Romulus Augustus. In Greek, his first name Romulus was also changed derisively into the nickname Momylus ("little disgrace").

BACKGROUND

By the time of emperor Diocletian (r. 284–305), the idea that the Roman Empire had grown so large that it would be better managed by two co-ruling emperors, rather than one, had become established. After various divisions were made throughout the 4th century, the empire was firmly and permanently divided into a western and eastern sphere of imperial administration from the death of emperor Theodosius I (r. 379–395) in 395 onwards. Though modern historians typically use the terms Western Roman Empire and Eastern Roman Empire to describe the new political situation, the Romans themselves never considered the empire to have been formally divided, still viewing it as a single unit, although most often having two rulers rather than one. Over the course of the 5th century, the western empire experienced a period of catastrophic decline. Not only were many of the rulers in the west generally lacking in competence, but they also faced enormous problems. In comparison with the eastern provinces, much of the west was more rural, with fewer people and a less stable economy. An increasing number of Germanic barbarian invasions and settlements throughout the west only added to these issues.

In 410, the Visigoths under Alaric I had sacked Rome and in 455, the last western emperor of Theodosius' dynasty, Valentinian III (r. 425–455), was deposed and murdered. That same year, Rome was sacked again for the second time in less than fifty years, this time by the Vandals. The Roman army became increasingly reliant on barbarian mercenaries and after Valentinian's murder, the most powerful barbarian generals, such as Ricimer (c. 418–472), became politically dominant, ruling through proclaiming puppet emperors. In the twenty years between the death of Valentinian and the accession of Romulus Augustus, eight different emperors ruled in the west. By 475, the western empire was in critical condition. Outside of Italy, authority was only exercised in Raetia and some regions of Gaul.

The ruling emperor in 475 was Julius Nepos, who had been in power for less than a year. Nepos had been appointed western emperor in 474 by the eastern emperors Leo I (r. 457–474) and Zeno (r. 474–491), but had little real support in the west. In 475, Nepos named Orestes as a patrician and *magister militum* ('master of soldiers'; effectively commander-in-chief), replacing the previous holder of that office, Ecdicius. Orestes was a distinguished late Roman figure, once having served as *notarius* (secretary) to the Hunnic king Attila. As *magister militum*, Orestes was tasked by Nepos to lead an army against Visigoths and Burgundians, *foederati* (barbarian allies of the empire) who were rebelling in southern Gaul. The army given to Orestes by Nepos was multi-ethnic, with many *foederati* soldiers. Heeding the grievances of his troops (among other things learning that Nepos had refused requests for land grants [13]), Orestes defied the emperor's orders and marched on Ravenna, the capital of the western empire. On 28 August 475, Orestes entered Ravenna with his army and Nepos escaped across the Adriatic Sea to Salona in Dalmatia.

Ancestry and family

There is little surviving concrete evidence in regards to Romulus' ancestry beyond Orestes being known to have been a Roman citizen from Pannonia and sparse information on his immediate family. Orestes' father was a Pannonian Roman officer by the name of Tatulus, and Tatulus had at least one other son, Paulus, who served as a *comes*. The name of Romulus' mother is not known, but it might have been Barbaria. The name Barbaria, otherwise rarely attested, may derive either from the *gens* (family) Barbii, attested in Roman Pannonia, or it may simply be the feminine version of the name *Barbarius*, attested from a few Roman individuals in southern Gaul. Another hypothesis identifies Romulus' mother as Flavia Serena. Romulus' maternal grandfather was a *comes*, also by the name of Romulus, attested as alive in 449, when he was sent on an embassy to Attila by the general Aetius. Orestes and Romulus Augustus' mother married at some point before 449. It is believed that Romulus' mother, and thus perhaps her immediate family, were, like Orestes, from Roman Pannonia.

It is possible that Romulus Augustus had older siblings, especially given that Romulus was born several years after the marriage of his parents. In ancient Rome, it was customary for the eldest son to be named after his grandfather. That Romulus was not named Tatulus thus indicates that he was not the firstborn boy.

The First Battle of Ravenna

The Battle of Ravenna was fought between supporters of Orestes and supporters of Julius Nepos for control of the Western Roman Empire. In prelude to the battle, Orestes had been ordered to raise a large army to confront tribal rulers in Gaul. Instead he led his force against emperor Julius Nepos in the capital Ravenna. Nepos was defeated and deposed, but managed to flee to Dalmatia. Orestes in turn enthroned his son Romulus Augustulus as Roman emperor. He was in turn overthrown by Odoacer in September 476 following the Roman defeat at Pavia.

REIGN

After an interregnum in the west lasting two months, Romulus, perhaps as young as ten years old, was proclaimed emperor in Nepos' stead by Orestes on 31 October 475. He was the last emperor to be proclaimed in the west. Why the interregnum since Nepos lasted so long and why Orestes, a high-ranking military official and a Roman by birth, did not take the imperial title for himself is not known. It is possible that Orestes was waiting for some form of formal recognition or response from emperor Zeno in the east, which never came. Romulus would throughout his brief ten-month reign be little more than a figurehead, with his father, who retained the position of *magister militum*, actually running much of the imperial administration. Zeno never recognised the rule of Romulus as emperor in the west, given that Nepos, invested as emperor by Zeno's predecessor Leo I, still ruled in exile in Dalmatia.

Problems with the Western Roman army, mainly composed of barbarian *foederati*, had escalated throughout the 470s. The issues the army had with the central government had been what allowed Orestes to depose Nepos. In 476, the barbarian *foederati* in Italy, composed mainly of the Herules, Scirians and Turcilingians, demanded land in Italy to settle on. Orestes refused. The leader of the *foederati* was Odoacer, a barbarian officer of undetermined tribal affiliation. Orestes had once worked alongside Odoacer's father Edeko at the court of Attila. On 28 August 476, Odoacer defeated Orestes in battle at Ticinum, captured him and had him executed.

On 4 September, Odoacer captured Ravenna, killing Orestes' deputy and brother Paulus during the fighting. Romulus was captured and deposed, whereafter Odoacer assumed control of Italy as its first king. Odoacer sent Romulus' western imperial regalia to emperor Zeno in the east, and swore allegiance to him, ruling without further imperial successors in the west. According to the 5th-century Eastern Roman writer and historian Malchus, Odoacer may have forced Romulus himself, as his last official act as emperor, to send the imperial regalia and a "letter of resignation" to Zeno, writing that the Roman Empire from this point only required a single emperor, ruling from Constantinople. Though Zeno granted Odoacer the distinction of patrician, he also urged the king to accept Julius Nepos back as emperor in Italy. Though Odoacer nominally accepted Nepos as his sovereign, minting coins in his name, Nepos was never able to reoccupy Italy.

DEPOSITION OF ROMULUS AUGUSTULUS

Odoacer's deposition of Romulus Augustus, occurring in 476 AD, was a coup that marked the end of the reign of the last Western Roman Emperor approved by the Western Roman Senate and the creation of the Kingdom of Italy through Odoacer's decision to adopt the title of Dux/Rex Italiae(Duke/King of Italy), although Julius Nepos exercised control over Dalmatia until 480.

Background

Rome had been sacked twice in the 5th century AD, after a lengthy decline which followed more than the better part of a millennium of dominance, first over central Italy and then over an empire that surrounded the Mediterranean Sea. First, in 410 a Visigothic army under the command of Alaric besieged, entered, and looted the city, and in 455 the Vandals attacked Rome after their king, Genseric, believing himself to have been snubbed by an usurper emperor, voided a peace treaty. Despite remaining the seat of the Roman Senate, and an important city of the Western Roman Empire, Rome was not what it had once been – the Western emperors had moved their courts to the more secure Ravenna in the wake of the two pillages and the Hun incursions.

The Vandals were allowed to enter the city after promising the Pope to spare its citizens, but they carried off many of the unfortunate Romans, some of whom were sold into slavery in their captors' North African realm. The widow of the emperors Valentinian III and Petronius Maximus, Licinia, was herself taken to Carthage, where her daughter was married to Genseric's son.

Rome not only lost a portion of its population during the Vandal rampage, but a fairly large amount of its treasures was plundered by the barbarians. This loot was later recovered by the Byzantines. At the time, however, its loss was a major blow to the Western Empire.

After Rome's weaknesses were exposed by the Vandals' invasion, the barbarian tribes of Gaul, once a secure province loyal to the Empire, began to rebel against their former overlords. The Ravenna-based emperors now began to lose the respect of many of their subjects, and powerful generals, often of barbarian origin themselves, were forced to defend them. Among the more successful of these commanders, the most senior of whom were called *magistri militum*, were Avitus, who would eventually be crowned emperor, and Ricimer (who was part-Sueve and half-Visigoth). Ricimer grew so powerful that he was able to choose and depose weak emperors almost at will.

In 475, the Western emperor, Julius Nepos (nephew of the Eastern empress), was overthrown by his *magister militum*, the aristocratic Orestes, who had once been a trusted official of Attila, the Hun ruler. Rather than take the throne himself, Orestes had his young son, Romulus Augustulus, crowned emperor. Orestes, who ruled in his son's name, found an enemy in the persons of his non-Roman mercenary soldiers. When, led by an auxiliary general called Odoacer, they demanded estates and were refused, they swept into Italy. Informing his soldiers that, if they followed and obeyed him, they would, in the words of Gibbon, "extort the justice that had been denied to their dutiful petitions", the Germanic, Arian Odoacer confirmed his leadership of the revolt. Barbarian soldiers in Italian cities and garrisons "flocked" to the audacious general's standard, and Orestes fled to fortified Pavia. Odoacer laid siege to Pavia, which fell in due course. The bishop of that city, Epiphanius, managed to ransom many of the captives taken during this invasion, but was unable to save Orestes, who was executed.

The Second Battle of Ravenna

The Battle of Ravenna, capital of the Western Roman Empire, between the Heruli under their King Odoacer and the remnants of the Western Roman army in Roman Italy occurred in early September 476, and represented a culminating event in the ongoing fall of the Western Roman Empire. The Western Roman Empire had been in relative decline since the beginning of the barbarian invasions and Rome, the symbolical heart and largest city of the Western Empire, was sacked in 410 by the Visigoths and in 455 by the Vandals. By 476 the Roman emperor was little more than a puppet, having very little de facto control of any territory outside of Italy. The last Roman emperor, Romulus Augustulus, was not recognized as a legitimate ruler outside of Italy; the Eastern Roman Empire recognized Julius Nepos as the true Western Roman Emperor.

Herulians were *foederati* of the Western Roman Empire; they were mercenary troops of the Roman army of Italy. They envied the fortune of their brethren in Gaul, Spain, and Africa, whose victorious arms had acquired an independent and perpetual inheritance; and they insisted that a third part of the lands of Italy should be immediately divided among them. Orestes, the father of emperor Romulus Augustus, rejected their demand – causing their revolt. From all the camps and garrisons of Italy the confederates flocked to the standard of Odoacer, their leader; Orestes later retreated to Pavia. Pavia was subsequently pillaged and Orestes was executed.

The decisive battle was fought on 2 September 476 near Ravenna, the capital of the Western Roman Empire: it saw the *foederati* defeat the largely depleted Roman garrison. The city, defended by Paulus (the brother of Orestes) was captured swiftly and easily. Two days later, the sixteen-year-old emperor Romulus Augustulus was forced to abdicate by Odoacer. Romulus was sent into retirement in Campania.

Odoacer's coup and accession

Orestes' brother was killed near Ravenna by Odoacer's forces, who entered the imperial capital soon afterward. The young monarch Romulus Augustulus was, on 4 September, compelled to abdicate before the Senate. That body requested that the Eastern Roman Emperor, Zeno, reunite his realm with the West, with Odoacer as his governor. The auxiliary commander, now master of Ravenna, encouraged the senators in this effort. The emperor was somewhat hesitant to give Odoacer what would be relative autonomy, citing that his wife's nephew Julius Nepos, still alive and recognized as *caesar* in Dalmatia, should be restored to the throne.

Zeno, however, did not want to use force to support his relation, so, while still urging Odoacer to recognize Nepos' claim, granted the general the rank of patrician and accepted the general's gift of the Western imperial standards.

The hapless ex-emperor, Romulus Augustulus, was still present in Ravenna, and Odoacer rid himself of the boy by exiling him. The fate of this final Western Roman emperor is somewhat uncertain, but it is believed that he retired to the Lucullan Villa in Campania and died before 488, when the body of the saint Severinus was brought there. In 480, the second of Odoacer's Roman rivals, Julius Nepos, was assassinated by "retainers". Until Nepos' murder, even the confirmation of Odoacer's patrician rank and authority had been undermined by the presence of Zeno's nephew.

Odoacer now proclaimed himself king of the Herules in Italy (476–493), but not king of Italy, as Italy formally remained a land of the Roman Empire after absorbing Augustus's powers, and formed alliances with other barbarians, a prime example being the Visigoths. He proved himself to be a capable ruler, and, although Italy was beset by disasters such as plagues and famines during the turbulent end of the 5th century, historians such as Edward Gibbon have attested to Odoacer's "prudence and humanity".

Aftermath

Despite possessing these qualities, Odoacer was unable to defeat the Ostrogoths and their monarch, Theodoric the Great, who invaded the Kingdom of Italy and overcame the forces that defended it. After four years of fighting, Odoacer, with some pressure from his citizens and his soldiers, decided in 493 that it would be useless to continue fighting and surrendered. The conqueror of the Western Roman Empire was himself conquered, and, unlike Romulus Augustus, he was not spared. While enjoying a banquet, he was murdered by an Ostrogoth, who may have been Theodoric himself.

When the Ostrogothic queen Amalasuntha, a Byzantine ally, was executed by her chosen successor Theodahad in 535, the Eastern Emperor, Justinian, did not hesitate to declare war. Under the command of the general Belisarius, an army landed in Sicily and subdued that island before invading Italy proper. When he did invade the peninsula, he took the city of Naples, then attacked and captured Rome. For nearly twenty years, the Ostrogoths and Romans fought for control of the peninsula. The suspicions of the Eastern empress, Theodora, often led her husband Justinian to withhold reinforcements from Belisarius, who was recalled several times. Some historians have concluded that the war's successful conclusion was the victory of Belisarius, but the honor of defeating the Ostrogoths went to Narses, who was trusted far more by his superiors in Constantinople. Eventually, after the Roman reconquest, another barbarian tribe, the Lombards, invaded and settled in Italy.

LATER LIFE

Odoacer spared the life of the young Romulus on account of his "youth and beauty". Romulus was granted an annual pension of 6,000 *solidi* (the normal income of a wealthy Roman senator) and granted an estate in Campania near Naples called the *castellum Lucullanum* (today called Castel dell'Ovo), originally built by the consul and general Lucius Licinius Lucullus in the 60s BC. *Castellum Lucullanum* had once served as the retirement villa of Tiberius (r. 14–37), Rome's second emperor. By late antiquity, *castellum Lucullanum* must have been fortified, and it likely functioned as a small administrative and military centre in Campania. Romulus was accompanied to Campania by a large retinue and some of his surviving relatives.

Romulus may have been alive as late as 507 or 511, when Theodoric the Great, Odoacer's successor as king of Italy, wrote to a "Romulus" to confirm a grant made to him and his mother by Petrus Marcellinus Felix Liberius, the praetorian prefect of Italy, on Theoderic's authority. Per Thomas Hodgkin, who translated the letter in 1886, the identification of Romulus in the letter as Romulus Augustus is strengthened by the name "Romulus" by this point not being very common and by the letter not giving the Romulus in question any titles or honorifics. The absence of titles differentiates the letter from the vast majority of other letters preserved from Theodoric, as if neither the king nor his scribe were quite sure how to address a former emperor. If the Romulus in the letter is the same person as Romulus Augustulus, it is possible that the letter indicates that Romulus and his family had to renegotiate their financial arrangements and pension with the king because they had been drawn up under the reign of a different king. Given that Romulus is not mentioned in accounts of the later eastern Roman invasion of Italy in the mid-530s, he had likely died some time before the conflict.

Romulus may have played a role in founding a monastery around the remains of Saint Severinus of Noricum at *castellum Lucullanum* in the 480s or early 490s. A Roman noblewoman by the name of Barbaria, possibly Romulus' mother, also aided in founding the monastery. This monastery became prominent under Pope Gregory I (r. 590–604) and was active until the 10th century.

LEGACY

Very few records survive of Romulus' reign. Any policies that he might have pursued are not known. The scant narrative record and few known coins, in addition to there not being any known inscriptions of significance or laws issued by the emperor, make him a shadowy and relatively inconsequential figure. Ralph W. Mathisen considered him in 1997 to have been "perhaps even the least significant" of the short-lived emperors near the end of the Western Roman Empire. When not seen as only inconsequential, opinions by historians on Romulus Augustus have been negative. In *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* (1776–1788), Edward Gibbon wrote that he "assumed and disgraced the names of Romulus [and] Augustus".

Romulus Augustus is typically regarded as the last Western Roman emperor, or even the last Roman emperor overall, with his deposition seen as marking the end of the Western Roman Empire as a political entity. The deposition of Romulus is also one of the most commonly used dates by historians to mark the transition from antiquity to the medieval period.

Romulus being seen as the last emperor over other contenders derives not only from Romulus having been the last emperor proclaimed in the west, but also from the poetic nature of being named after both Romulus, the founder of Rome, and Augustus, the first Roman emperor. Many historians have noted the coincidence that the last emperor combined the names of both the city's founder and the first emperor. In *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, Gibbon wrote that "the appellations of the two great founders of the city and of the monarchy were thus strangely united in the last of their successors".

Some modern scholars consider Romulus' distinction as the last western emperor to be dubious. In particular, some historians, such as Ralph W. Mathisen and Marjeta Šašel Kos, have pointed to Julius Nepos as the actual last Western Roman emperor. Though he never regained Italy, Nepos continued to rule in Dalmatia, with support from Zeno and with nominal recognition by Odoacer, until he was murdered in 480. Throughout the duration of his brief reign, Romulus was never recognised in Constantinople, with the eastern court instead continuing to recognise Nepos as the legitimate western emperor.

Though none would be widely recognised thereafter, Nepos also was not the last person to claim the western empire. From about 477 to 516, the Moorish *dux* Masties in North Africa claimed to be an emperor. In Visigothic Hispania, two Roman usurpers rose from the Ebro valley, attempting to claim imperial authority: Burdunellus (496) and Petrus (506).

Romulus Augustus being identified as the last emperor of the western empire is a tradition that began already among eastern Roman historians and writers in the early 6th century. The earliest known writer to consider him as such was Marcellinus Comes (died c. 534), who wrote the following passage concerning Romulus:

> *The western Empire of the Roman people, which first began in the seven hundred and ninth year after the founding of the City with Octavian Augustus, the first of the emperors, perished with this Augustulus, in the five-hundred and twenty-second year of the reign of Augustus' successor emperors. From this point on Gothic kings held power in Rome.*

Later Eastern Roman authors continued to regard him as the last emperor of the western empire. Procopius (c. 500–after 565) considered Romulus to have been the last legitimate ruler in the west, as did Jordanes (also 6th century).